

The NATO and democracy seen from Spain

Ángel Rivero

Instituto Atlántico-Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

In 1960 the American sociologist C. Wright Mills used the words “NATO intellectuals” to name those “smug conservatives, tired liberals and disillusioned radicals that defended [in the post-war western world] the system”, that is, liberal democracy. A system in which these “NATO intellectuals” found no “antagonistic contradictions” thanks to the “mixed economy, plus the welfare state, plus prosperity [that was the formula] and in “which Capitalism will continue to be workable and the welfare state will continue along the road to ever greater justice”. To Wright Mills, to celebrate the post-war consensus, as Daniel Bell or Arthur Schlesinger did, was in fact a celebration of apathy, and the then proclaimed “end of ideology” was to him sheer capitalist ideology. However, he boasted that this dark era was ending, and that the “age of complacency” was ending. Those that focus “on the antagonistic contradictions of the system” were beginning to move again.

Then, as today, “antagonistic contradictions” was the magic concept to exit liberal democracy, and then, as now, populist and radicals proclaim that the end of liberal democracy is approaching and that soon we will contemplate its total demise. Nevertheless, is it really the case? Of course, it is a fact that past and present populists’ goal was to destroy liberal or representative democracy “in the name of the people”; and it is clear that present day populists have raised the banner of “illiberal democracy” to exit “fake” liberal democracy in the name of the people. Sure, by doing this, they are putting an end to the “happy apathy” of post-cold-war Europe and of the world at large after the fall of the Berlin wall, and this has consequences for the democracy, and for the NATO as part of the “system”.

According to Celeste A. Wallander we are living a “democratic decline that could destroy the Alliance”. To her, the most serious problems [for the NATO] are not Terrorism, Migration, Russia or President Trump, “the most serious problem is not one of these obvious threats; rather, it is the breakdown of liberal democracy within the alliance itself”. In her view “the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation has never been a typical military alliance. From its inception in 1949, NATO has not only deterred and defended against external threats; it has also advanced the principles of liberal democratic governance”. She explains that although its cohesion initially rested on the common threat of the Soviet Union, NATO was unified thanks to the common democratic character of most of its members: nearly all were democratically elected governments, accountable to their citizens and where the rule of law and the protection of individual rights was the norm. In fact, article 2 of NATO’s founding treaty committed members to “strengthening their free institutions”.

However, to Wallander, 70 years after the foundation of NATO the alliance is today in peril because “multiple members are dismantling the institutions and practices of liberal democracy that emerged triumphant in the Cold War, and things may get worse if autocratic demagogues exploit populist fears to gain political clout in other member states”. To sum up, to Wallander, the NATO is in peril because democracy is, for the first time after the end of the Cold War, threatened to break up in many NATO’s member states.

Many other scholars share this sombre picture of the future of NATO and, above all, of the future of liberal democracy. For instance, Jacob Parakilas stated the the 70th Anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization faces “growing external threats –and even more significant, threats from within, as some of its member states turn towards authoritarianism and away from democracy”.

To Parakilas, NATO itself cannot stop this wave of authoritarianism inside NATO because to him “NATO is first and foremost a military alliance” and, “as such it reflects the internal politics of its members to a far a greater degree than it shapes them”. In his view, being a flexible military alliance “creates vulnerabilities against illiberalism and anti-democratic currents within its borders”. In order to illustrate this point Parakilas mentions “NATO’s history is not one of exclusive liberalism or democracy. Greece, Portugal and Turkey were all members in good standing during their various periods of military rule throughout the Cold War”. Moreover, he concludes by stating, “The existence of NATO (...) is not guarantee of a liberal order or a liberal Europe”. Let me now pinpoint the main ideas advanced by Wallander and Parakilas:

1- NATO is in peril because “multiple members are dismantling the institutions and practices of liberal democracy that emerged triumphant in the Cold War” [Wallender]

2- There is nothing NATO can do to stop the decline of democracy in the state members because the NATO “is, first and foremost, a military alliance” [Parakilas]

3- To Wallander, NATO is above all a liberal democracies club. To Parakilas, it can be seen “as an alliance of liberal democracies”, but this is not an essential attribute of NATO but “of the member states”. NATO can be “an alliance of liberal democracies because its membership has chosen to be liberal and democratic. But apparently, this is no longer the case in many state members” [Parakilas]

4-Conclusion, NATO is in peril given the decline of democracy among its members; NATO can do nothing to stop this decline, thus democracy is also in peril among NATO members.

Although there is a pessimistic global mood on the future of democracy, I do not share it. Wallander made the strong point that many members of NATO are *dismantling the institutions and practices of liberal democracy* but, is it really the case?

I do not think so. Although measuring democracy is always complex and debatable, it is available to us the reliable and accurate tool: the *The Economist Democracy Index*. According to the last index available [2018] among the 29 countries that belong to the Alliance there are:

1- Nine *full democracies* (Germany, United Kingdom, Spain, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Luxemburg, Iceland, and The Netherlands. Seven parliamentary monarchies and two republics).

2- Seventeen *flawed democracies* (USA, France, Italy, Poland, Belgium, Greece, Czech Republic, Portugal, Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Croatia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Latvia, Estonia. Sixteen republics and one parliamentary monarchy).

3- Three are *hybrid regimes* [in between democracy and authoritarianism] (Turkey, Albania and Montenegro. Three republics). These regimes are not proper democracies, but at least they are partly democratic as seen, for instance, this year, were even in Turkey the opposition is able to win local elections in the biggest cities of the country like Istanbul and Ankara.

These data show that there is enough empirical evidence to say that NATO is still a very democratic club. In fact, it can also be said that it is much more democratic today than in the past. There is not a single authoritarian country among its members (contrary to what happened during the Cold War) and many of the most democratic countries of the world belong to NATO (nine out of the twenty *full democracies* listed by the *The Economist*). To say that some of its members have “turn towards authoritarianism and away from democracy” clearly overestimated the populist rhetoric of Orbán and others, and his impact overall the alliance.

Clearly, Populism is a challenge to liberal democracy and can be a threat. However, Norway, the most democratic country of the world according to the *Democracy Index* has a strong Populist party, the Progress Party, that makes part of a government coalition with Conservatives, Liberals and Christian democrats. The rhetoric of populism can be awful but democracy is something different and should not be measured by reference to the public discourse. It should be measured according to facts: elections, human rights, freedom of expression, and so on.

The present wave of Populism, dangerous as it is, is not to be confused with a wave of authoritarianism. Of course, there is an authoritarian bias in Populism but its realization depends crucially of the institutional context of democracy. In my view, the Wallander diagnosis on democracy among NATO members and on the decline of NATO should be qualified. It is an important warning but it does not gives us a clear picture of reality.

The other question I would like to address in this presentation is Parakilas point on the role of NATO in preserving democracy. As already mentioned he maintains that NATO faces significant internal threats from within “as some of its member states turn towards authoritarianism and away from democracy” (I point that I have already answered in connection with Wallander). Nevertheless, he also underlies that NATO can do nothing to preserve democracy in its state members, because “NATO is first and foremost a military alliance”.

I do not agree with him because the idea that the members of NATO are turning to authoritarianism is not supported by empirical evidence. However, I neither agree with his point on NATO’s lack of democratizing capacity. On the contrary, there is evidence that shows that NATO can be an agent of democratisation. As Helene Sjursen has written “At the end of the Cold War many predicted that the Atlantic Alliance would wither away. With the loss of its enemy, the very purpose of the organization, the basis of its legitimacy and the glue that kept the allied states together were also gone”. But this prophecy was not fulfilled and NATO is still alive and still is the core security organization of the western world.

Sjursen explains this resilience of NATO by pointing to the democratic identity of the alliance: “NATO was never only a military alliance held together by a sense of a common external threat; rather it was and is a community of liberal democratic values and norms”. At the centre of these common values is the principle of democracy. In the Preamble of the Treaty (1949) it is stated that the parties are “determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law”. The NATO embodies the traditions of liberty of the Atlantic World, a bunch of traditions in which its core value is constitutional politics, what we term today liberal democracy. In this sense, by protecting and disseminating the traditions of liberty [Constitutional Politics, Liberal Democracy] NATO is instrumental in the development and

consolidation of democracy. Present Spanish democracy can be seen as instance of this democratising role of NATO.

The restoration of democracy (and of monarchy) began at the end of 1975 with Francisco Franco's death. In July 1976, King Juan Carlos I appointed Adolfo Suárez prime minister. In June 1977 were held the first free elections (the Spanish Communist Party was allowed to participate). The new parliament wrote a democratic constitution that was approved in referendum the 6th of December 1978. By the end of that year, the main institutions of democracy were already established but democracy was not yet consolidated. In 1981 King Juan Carlos I dismantled a Coup d'état against democracy put in motion by a tiny section of the Spanish army. It should be remembered that the army was the main pillar of Franco's dictatorship, and that authoritarianism was a strong component of its political culture.

Becoming member of NATO in May 1982 was thus very important in the transformation of the Spanish army. It permitted to transform an authoritarian institution in a modern democratic way. Thus, seen from Spain, NATO makes part of our own democracy. Thanks to NATO Spain transformed its army; and finally yet importantly, thanks to NATO Spain recovered its place among the nations of the Atlantic World, the heirs of the Atlantic Revolutions, of Constitutional Politics and Liberalism. Being a member of NATO can help to improve democracy and also opened the road to reach the European Union in 1986 (together with Portugal).

To conclude, Populism can be a threat but also a challenge to democracy, but there is not an authoritarian wave among the NATO member states; At the core of NATO are the values of what Walter Lippmann called the Atlantic World, the heirs of the Atlantic Revolutions; Finally, NATO was and is an agent of democratization. The prophecies on the decline of democracy in Europe and the death of NATO should be qualified.

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